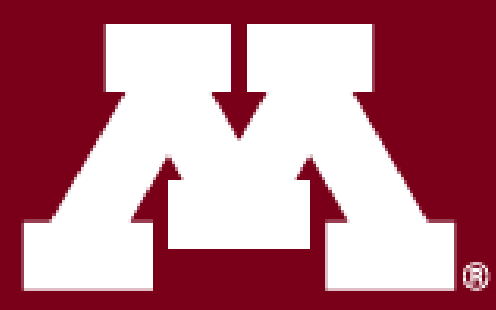


ETHICAL DILEMMAS EXPERIENCED BY YOUTH WORKERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kate Walker & Tamara Ginger Weiss Rhodes, Center for Youth Development



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION

ABSTRACT

Youth work is inherently filled with dilemmas: the challenges in which there are tensions between competing considerations, conflicting interests, and multiple options for taking action (Larson & Walker, 2010). Ethical challenges in particular deal with “rights, duties, needs, interests, relationships, motives and the maintenance or transgression of prevailing norms” (Banks, 2010, p.12). Complex ethical dilemmas often surface unexpectedly within everyday practice. They unfold quickly and demand a response within a very short time frame. To understand and improve effective youth work practice during such ethical dilemmas, our research explores the types of ethical tensions that practitioners face and how contextually embedded responses facilitate ethical development for both the youth worker and young person. Our research is based on interview data collected from 25 program leaders across time in 13 programs for high school aged youth. Leaders were asked to identify a recent dilemma situation they faced in the program, what considerations they had in this situation, how they formulated their response, and what happened as a result. This yielded data about 71 dilemma scenarios, 18 of which were identified as ethical. This poster features three types of ethical dilemmas that arise in youth work, including situations where a young person violates a program norm, engages in illicit or risky behavior, and situations that represented incongruent values between youth worker and the young people or their family. We also present three key features of program leaders’ responses to these situations and discuss implications for training and supporting youth workers.

METHODS

SAMPLE OF LEADERS & PROGRAMS

Interviews were conducted with the 1-3 adult leaders at each program. The **25 leaders** had an average of 14 years of youth work experience (range: 3-42). Fifteen were paid full-time staff (5 part-time, 5 unpaid); 19 had college degrees (9 with master's degrees). The sample included 14 women and 11 men, with a median age 35 (range 24-62). Sixteen were European Americans; 3 Latina/os; 3 African Americans and 3 of mixed ethnicity.

Programs were recruited from three regions: Chicago (N=5), Central Illinois (N=4), and the Minneapolis/St. Paul area (N=4). They included **arts, STEM, and leadership programs**; 10 were community-based and three were in schools. We chose programs that **met for at least 100 hours and served working-class and low-income youth**. The youth served were from diverse ethnic backgrounds (one third Latina/o, African American, and European American).

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Leaders were interviewed four times throughout the program cycle. During the second, third, and fourth interviews, they were asked to identify a recent dilemma situation they faced in the program, what considerations they had in this situation, how they formulated their response, and what happened as a result. This yielded data about **71 dilemma scenarios**.



DATA ANALYSIS

In the first stage of analysis, **18 of 71 total dilemmas were identified as ethical**. Second level coding identified program leaders’ considerations, responses, values, strategies for seeking and drawing on support or help. This second level coding also included an analysis of how the participant framed the outcomes of the dilemma, and their opinions in hindsight about the handling as well as what lessons learned could inform youth development trainings in the future.

The **case examples profiled illustrate key themes** that repeatedly surfaced during interviews with youth workers describing ethical dilemmas. These preliminary theoretical findings provide evidence for ethical issues of primary concern for youth workers as well as suggest implications that may be used to inform staff training and organizational support.

CASE EXAMPLES: 3 TYPES OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS

VIOLATION OF PROGRAM NORMS: STOLEN IPOD

Dilemma: A youth took another participant’s iPod during a Program activity and chose not to admit that he had it until it started ringing from his pocket.

Considerations: The program leader valued the youth’s Ethical development and wanted the youth to continue participation in the program. Yet the youth had committed an unacceptable offense and a programmatic rule violation.

Response: The leader isolated the youth from the group and **engaged in dialogue to draw upon their pre-established relationship**. She **contextualized the youth’s behavior** within a broader set of experiences and observations she had of the youth. Finally, she focused on the **youth’s strengths** to analyze what happened, **then worked with the youth** to help him understand and address the consequences.

Outcome: The youth demonstrated reflection by taking the perspective of the ‘other’ and remorse by accepting personal responsibility for his actions. He took action to repair damaged relationships by publicly apologizing to his peers, and experienced forgiveness and compassion when the victim agreed to allow him to continue participating in the program.



RISKY OR ILLICIT BEHAVIOR: HOMELESS YOUTH

Dilemma: A young woman is estranged from her family and making choices that compromise the physical safety of herself and her partner.

Considerations: The program leader understood the youth’s perspective and need for support, and wanted to respect her autonomous decision-making. However, the youth was making naïve decisions that only addressed short-term conflicts at the risk of her long-term livelihood.

Response: The leader knew this **youth needed advice**, and wanted to preserve her role as **a safe person** she could turn to for counsel. She connected the youth to information and resources and **dedicated additional time** to guiding the youth. She **shared concerns** with the youth and **helped her think critically** about the options and threats affecting their physical and mental health in the situation.

Outcome: The youth walked away from pursuing a dangerous option and sought assistance from a friend. The program leader continued to stay in regular contact with the youth to provide emotional support and link the youth to additional local resources.



INCONGRUENT VALUES: MILITARY RECRUITER

Dilemma: A military recruiter approached the program leader to retrieve documentation about a youth participant who has recently enlisted.

Considerations: The program leader disapproved of how the recruiter cultivated a personal relationship with the youth to enlist her in the military rather than support her to choose from a range of opportunities available to her for financing college. Yet refusing the recruiter’s request and preventing the youth from pursuing this option would have violated the leader’s responsibilities.

Response: The leader **felt ill-prepared** to address the dilemma, and **recognized that it recalled emotions** from a personal experience of watching a brother plan to enlist in the military. The leader **reached out** to other staff members to talk through the situation, arrive at a solution, and plan to proceed.

Outcome: The youth did enlist in the military, though it made her ineligible to receive scholarship funding for college from the program. The youth continued to seek support from the program in various ways.

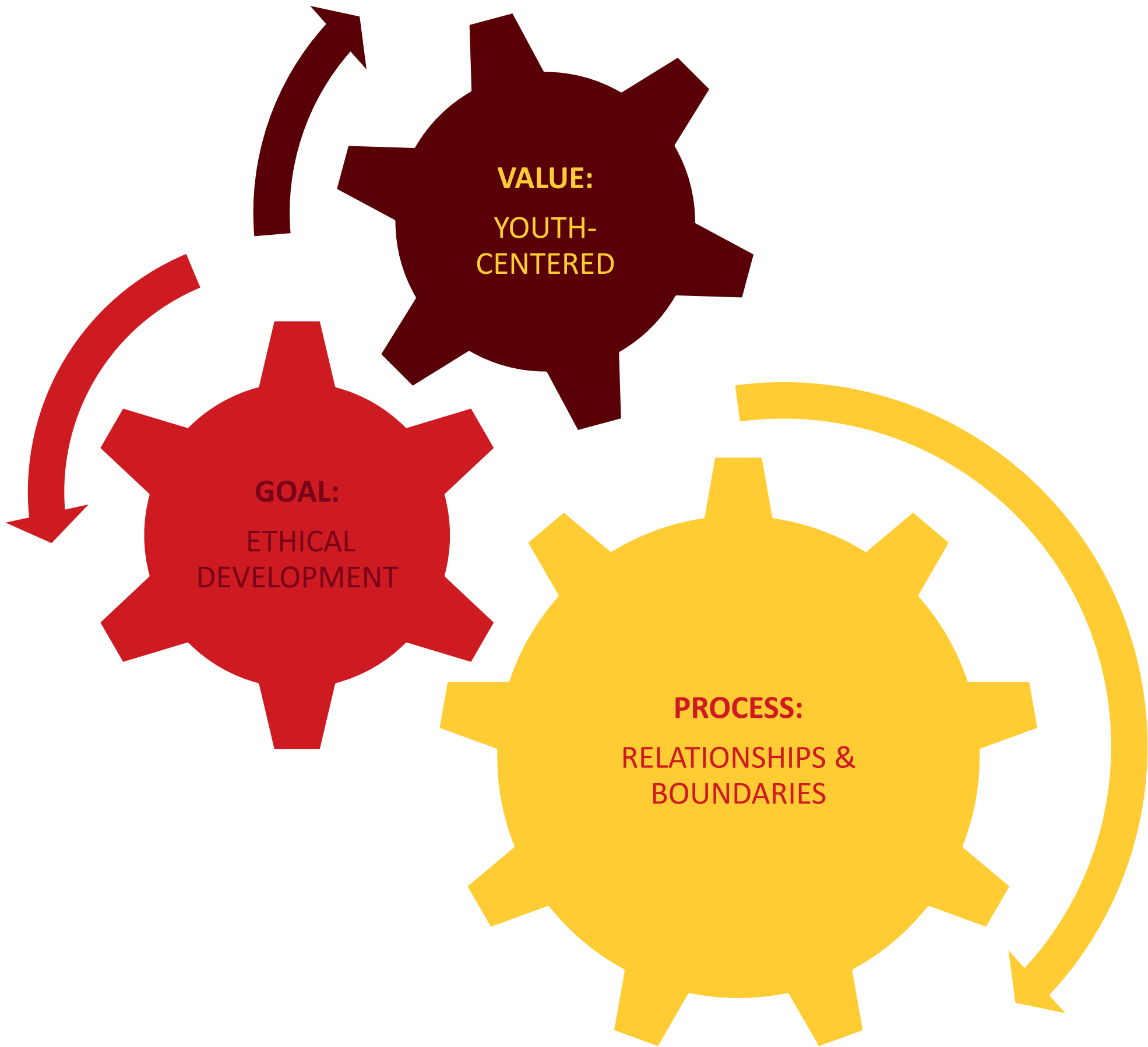


KEY FEATURES OF RESPONSES

CORE VALUES, GOALS & PROCESSES

Across these ethical dilemmas, the program leaders we studied:

- Were committed to crafting responses that valued and kept **youth needs** and **interests** at the center;
- Tried to **model ethical behavior** for the youth as well as **promote youth’s ethical development**; and
- Leveraged **relationships** forged with youth while negotiating **professional boundaries**.



IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING & SUPPORT

FOSTER AWARENESS OF ETHICS & PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

- Understand **ethical dimensions** of youth work, range of dilemmas to anticipate, and features of effective response.
- Leverage **personal knowledge**, background and experience to model and encourage young people’s ethical development.

STIMULATE ETHICAL REFLECTION & DIALOGUE

- Build in **staff meeting time** to raise and discuss dilemmas that arise.
- Reinforce the importance and guide the process of **taking time to reflect** and not react in haste.

PROVIDE ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT & GUIDANCE

- **Sensitize staff** to the ethical issues that can arise.
- Offer **guidelines** on how to support ethical development.
- Clearly **communicate expectations** through training and ongoing support.